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Attached are Harry
Carlson's remarks on
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Comments on Draft NIE: "Whither Gorbachev"

On the whole, this is an excellent draft. It contains a wealth of useful information and judgments, particularly with respect to Gorbachev's assessments, motives, and "vision."

In view of the importance of this paper as a baseline Soviet estimate of the outlook over the next decade, I suggest that greater attention be focused on two areas: (a) the articulation of alternative scenarios, and (b) judgments about the relationships between scenarios and foreign policy behavior.

Alternative Scenarios:

First, I would suggest dropping the third and fourth scenarios: reversion to a neo-Stalinist system and evolution toward democratic socialism. The draft acknowledges that the odds of either will remain small (5 to 10% and 0 to 5%, respectively) under any foreseeable circumstances. Listing these two "alternatives" would do little to enhance the credibility of the estimate.

Second, excluding these obviously improbable scenarios would leave only two alternatives: "rejuvenation" of the existing system and "systemic reform." This would seem to offer an excessively narrow spectrum of possibilities, given the forces at work in Soviet society. There is an additional problem: the draft implies that failure to achieve systemic reform would result in the leadership's settling for "rejuvenation." But a case could be made that failure of Gorbachev's reformist program would have major long-term political and economic consequences that would make an orderly adjustment toward "rejuvenation" highly doubtful. A collapse of Gorbachev's "vision" could well trigger crippling conflicts within the leadership, demoralization of the party and government elite, and ominous public unrest throughout the multinational empire and in Eastern Europe.

I would suggest that the treatment of the "rejuvenation" scenario be reconsidered. As it stands, it has an unreal quality based as it is on the questionable assumption that rejuvenation is a reasonably uncomplicated and straightforward fallback the leadership could adopt if systemic reform proves unworkable or abortive for other reasons. I suspect the sequence would be much more ambiguous and volatile. It is now a political imperative that at least the initial phases of Gorbachev's program must be tested. The outcome of this period of testing will determine the future evolution of the system--either a reversion to Brezhnev-style muddling through or retention of some elements of Gorbachev's plans, if systemic reform proves to be beyond reach.

Good point

It seems to me the estimate should convey an unambiguous message that the overriding reality at this juncture is that the Gorbachev leadership has committed itself to a high-risk venture in "controlled revolution" to effect sweeping changes in a deeply entrenched political-economic order that history has shown to be highly resistant to change. Failure of this venture would impose enormous political and economic damage and costs which, at worst, could propel the country into something resembling a "time of troubles." At best, overcoming these consequences would require prolonged political and economic salvage operations and ad hoc improvisations, the outcome of which no one could foresee with any confidence.

If community representatives endorse the draft's verdict that there is only a 30 percent probability of systemic reform, I'd suggest that the estimate should offer more detailed and precise judgments regarding likely alternatives. I would replace the single "rejuvenation" scenario with two alternatives: (a) the best and least costly alternative to failure or abandonment of Gorbachev's program would be a reversion to a "normal" condition of muddling through, i.e., tinkering at the margins to improve the existing system and relying on a style of political and economic management that resembles the Brezhnev period from 1970 to 1978. Under this scenario, the optimum outcome would salvage some elements of the program that would at least create the potential for modest but lasting rejuvenation. The less satisfactory outcome would be a reversion to the kind of immobilism and defense of the status quo that characterized the last four years of Brezhnevism.

This outcome is covered in para. 49 which judges that the political turmoil and economic dislocations produced by the implementation of Gorbachev's vision "will place substantial pressures on the leadership to either advance forward to carry out a package of comprehensive reforms...or to fall back to a set of political, economic and social arrangements not unlike those of the Brezhnev era." But the draft seems to assume that reversion to Brezhnevism would allow for genuine rejuvenation. It then confuses this judgment by stating (para. 51) that "Rejuvenation would not fundamentally change the system, but neither would it be a return to Brezhnevism." Did the Brezhnev period as a whole represent "rejuvenation" or not?

(b) The second scenario would present a worst case from the Soviet standpoint. It would raise the possibility (or probability) that Gorbachev's determination to "proceed with a radical overhaul of the command economy" will backfire and that time and events will demonstrate that the general secretary's self-confident and audacious gamble was based on fundamental miscalculation of the system's capacity to accommodate sweeping changes without unacceptable costs and dislocations. The estimate should be careful to avoid even an implicit assumption that Gorbachev's prescriptions represent the most sagacious and efficacious approach to revitalizing the system. It should address the contingency raised by Ed Hewett of Brookings over a year ago: that Gorbachev "is trying to do what quite possibly cannot be done." Similar doubts about the soundness and feasibility of Gorbachev's program have been expressed by [redacted] an employee of the USSR Ministry of Agriculture from 1954 to 1978, now at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey. [redacted] observed that "there is an

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inherent contradiction in mobilizing the bureaucracy to demobilize itself."

In sum, Gorbachev's plans may very well prove to be "fatally flawed." If so, the prime question for judgment would be how the leadership will dig itself out of the morass and deal with the consequences of a misguided reform. Would Gorbachev remain in power, or would he be removed? If he stays, would he beat a controlled retreat and settle for modest rejuvenation or Brezhnevism without Brezhnev? Or would he stubbornly persist and force a potentially destructive showdown? These contrasting outcomes obviously would have very different implications for US policy.

Hewett recalled that Soviet leaders in the past, when the crunch appeared, were unwilling to enforce politically unpopular reforms, and he contended that Gorbachev's plans resemble the failed reforms sponsored by Kosygin in 1965. Hewett concluded that "If Gorbachev is not only a creature of the existing system, but also its captive, we could well be in for a period similar to the second half of the 1960s, when the leadership declared the reform to be going well, even though, in fact, it was dying."

To repeat, I believe the estimate should tackle this crucial question of the possible implications of failure of reform in greater detail. Rejuvenation may not be the most likely alternative to systemic reform. If Gorbachev stands and fights to a showdown, the backlash and political fallout could have profound consequences, including, in the worst case, temporary destabilization of the Soviet system and immense damage to the USSR's global position as well as to the integrity of the Eastern European glacis.

Alternative Scenarios and Foreign Policy

I'd suggest that the implications of the scenarios for the West need further reflection. Given the record of Soviet foreign policy since the revolution, I question whether it is sound to draw such clear-cut relationships between domestic conditions and policies, on the one hand, and the state of East-West relations, on the other. (pages 9-10) Specifically, were overtures toward limited accommodations with the West by Khrushchev in the late 1950s and by Brezhnev in the late 1960s and 1970s motivated by domestic imperatives or by geopolitical trends that shaped Soviet foreign political strategy? Were these overtures not primarily the product of the profound impact on Moscow's global prospects caused by the rift with China and Soviet concern to head off what Brezhnev described to Nixon and Kissinger in 1974 as a "military agreement" between the US and China?

I would take a close second look at the assumption (page 10) that systemic reform would bring "significant changes in Soviet policies in a direction consistent with Western interests," and that failure of reform "would reduce the chances" for changes favorable to the West. The record does not support such a straight-line correlation between domestic developments and foreign policy behavior.

Pages 10 and 12 judge that failure of systemic reform would probably bring to power "a more conservative leadership" less inclined to see a need for arms control agreements and more disposed to accept confrontation as "the natural order of thing." But if this simple correlation is accepted, how does one explain the "conservative" Brezhnev's dogged pursuit of detente and accommodation with the US and West Germany, arms control, and his "Peace Program?" Can Brezhnev's foreign policies in the early 1970s be fairly described as nothing more than "cosmetic changes?" (page 11)

As for foreign policy implications of systemic reform, what does the judgment on page 11 mean?-- "The East-West relationship would remain strongly competitive, but we believe the center of gravity of the competition would be likely to shift toward the political arena?" Where has the "center of gravity" been in the last three decades? Hasn't the competition always been fundamentally "political," with the rivalry and posturing in strategic weapons only the most conspicuous manifestation of the scuffle for advantage and influence in the political arena?